Disposing of dead images

Disposing of dead images: reflections on contentious heritage as toxic waste.

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Dead Images

This contribution comes from within the work of creating and then destroying the Dead Images exhibition. The exhibition was built across three large studio spaces at the Edinburgh College of Art. It was opened to the public on the 28th of June, 2018, and closed on the 25th of August (figure 1).

The main feature of the exhibition was a very large photograph, approximately 30 meters long and 3 meters high, of a display of somewhat over 8000 human skulls in a cabinet along a corridor in the Natural History Museum of Vienna. The photograph was created by Tal Adler in 2012. It is a multi-perspective panorama of very high-resolution, which would allow it to be printed life-sized, at a 1:1 ratio, and for the resulting print to be highly and vividly detailed.

The image existed in digital form until June 2018 when Eastern Exhibition and Display printed Tal's photograph onto 32 x self-adhesive grey-back vinyl drops. These were affixed to a temporary MDF wall and so a life-sized panorama of a skull cabinet at the Natural History Museum of Vienna came to be displayed before the public in Edinburgh to be visited by somewhat over 1500 people (figure 2).

An ethnography of Dead Images

The Dead Images exhibition and related events (a conference, lectures, workshops etc.) was the culmination of more than two years of work by a core team of six people, Tal Adler, Linda Fibiger, John Harries, Maria Teschler-Nicola, Joan Smith and Anna Szöke, who were convened as "Creative Co-Production (CCP) 4 with the TRACES project. As the work went

on this team expanded to include an educational assistant, Ola Wojtkiewicz, two interns, Callum Fisher and Hayley Whittingham, and an ethnographer, Aglaja Kempinksi.

Aglaja's chapter gives a fuller description of the team and the complex, energising, enlightening, sometimes fractious and frustrating work of "creative coproduction", but it is worth noting that the author of this piece is writing as a member of this "core" team. It is also worth noting that I am not writing as an ethnographer. My time with the Dead Images project was spent coordinating resources, organising a conference, sweeping floors, writing bits of text, and, above all else, talking with the rest of the team, whether in meetings, via skype or "pings" on basecamp, about what we should do and how we should do it.

This is not, then, an ethnographic piece. What I do have is some insight into the complex work of making a complex thing. The particular focus is, however, not on making but on unmaking and destruction. This is, on other words, an ethnographic chapter, written by someone who did not do ethnographic research, about the destruction of a work of art, specifically the big print of a very high resolution photograph of over 8000 skulls.

Destroying an Exhibition

One could reasonably ask why attend to the unmaking of an exhibition, rather than its making.

One answer is that in attending to the destruction of the "Skull Cabinet Panorama" we are attending to a process that is mostly neglected in writing anthropological accounts of artistic endeavour, where the focus is on art as a peculiar genre of making and expression (Gell 1998; Ingold 2013) or the affordances of art as alternative mode of ethnographic inquiry (Foster 1995; Schneider & Wright 2013). Art is, as my experience of being involved in the Dead Images exhibition revealed, not only made, it is unmade, and so our ethnographic understandings of art practice should be extended to embrace the afterlife of an exhibition.

Beyond this, however, this afterlife of art, this process of dis-assemblage, transformation and ruination, is worthy of attention because it brings into view the materiality of the exhibition as a form of public assembly whose constitution is critically exposed and exposed to critique as this assembly is disbanded and those things that were gathered together become unmoored from the attachments that we crafted in the making of an exhibition. In attending to the unmaking of an exhibition we may, therefore, explore the anxieties that haunt the becoming of such public events as a form of, what Bruno Latour calls, *ding politik*: a gathering of things and people which constitutes "a hybrid forum" or "agora" (Latour 2005: 23) or, to use Paul Basu and Sharon MacDonald's phrase, a "space of encounter" (2007: 14). In their dissolution we may bring into view the fragility of such public spaces of encounter, a fragility that is intrinsic to the very constitution of the exhibition as the "demon" to its "demos" (Latour 2005: 24-25), and so animates and motivates the work of securing attachments, of nailing things down to ensure as much as possible the integrity of this space and the quality of affective encounter that this space affords.

The big photo coming down

On Tuesday, the 28th of August, Callum and I tore the big photograph of skulls down. This was not a difficult task. We just hauled the photograph the bottom and it pulled away from the plywood in long sticky sheets. Sometimes the sheets would tear and we would climb a ladder to peel away the photo from the top, but that was no problem. The only thing that happened was that Callum experienced electric shocks when pulling the photograph away from the plywood. Static electricity we supposed. But it was enough to make him stop what he was doing and take a step back.

The photograph became a crumpled mass on the floor. We pulled and pushed at this mess of vinyl sheets to get them compact enough to fit into the bin bags. We took to tearing and

folding and then standing on the folded remains. Then we shoved remains into the bin bags and carried these bags filled with the sticky mass of a destroyed photograph along Lauriston Place onto Middle Meadow Walk and then into Crystal MacMillan Building to a cupboard in the stairwell between the fourth and fifth floors, where we had been given permission to store the remains anticipating their final disposal.

The thing was Callum had acquired many bin bags for little money. You get what you pay for. They were useless, tearing apart like paper. So we walked through the circulating street life of the city on an overcast day with these bags dangling from our hands and cradled in our arms. And the bags were coming apart and as they came apart you could see the skulls, no longer as a neat flat display (crushed and mangled as they were), but still visible.

Aglaja's chapter in this volume describes the importance of "humour" in how the people of "CCP4" got on and dealt with stuff. Dark humour. Maybe even transgressive humour. So, darkly, Callum and I found humour in this situation. As we walked down Lauriston Place we voiced a fantasy that the bags would come apart all together and the mangled images of skulls would come tumbling out and carelessly join the life of the street. Bits of the destroyed photograph would transform into detritus, circulating beyond control, unmoored from structures of display, concern and authorship. There for all to see.

This was the sad joke of it: after all the talk and worry about carefully curating the encounter with the photograph, we would, at the very last minute, be grossly, inadvertently careless, just because we bought the cheapest garbage bags possible.

Making contentiousness

As a "Creative Co-Production" we undertook the work of making contentiousness. This does not mean that gatherings of human skulls in museums and universities are not contentious

already, but we wanted to bring this contentiousness into view, to make people aware, reflect and respond. Much of this work took the form of managing the visibility of the photograph so as to transform looking upon a still image of a display of skulls into an ethical, even political, act, which implicated the viewer, as well as we who brought this image into view, in the difficult history of constituting and keeping craniological collections.

We did so by withholding sight of the photograph until the viewer had been made aware of the problematic nature of such a display. So the visitor would come through the doors of the studio to see the "back" of the photograph. They would turn right and pass before a series of four video pieces in which various people with various involvements and concerns with craniological collections would introduce themselves and then speak of their thoughts and feelings about the good and bad of displaying human remains. The last of these video pieces focussed on the question of the image itself: Should it have been made? Should it be seen?

Once the visitor had watched the videos and had, suitably sensitised to contentiousness of the panorama of skulls, paused to question whether they should look upon the photograph, they would pass a sign forbidding any photography (figure 3), turn left when faced with a temporary plywood wall, which ensured the photograph could not be carelessly seen, then turn right to come before the photograph itself.

Of course, this was a properly attentive and disciplined visitor. One could just enter the exhibition ignore everything else and stand before the photograph without breaking stride or pausing to listen to the murmur of voices speaking as to why this photograph should be a matter of concern. The spectre of the thoughtless visitor, the selfie-taking tourist, the artistic flanneur, troubled us, but what could we do?

Moreover, our capacity to engineer thoughtfulness was limited by practicalities and, finally, money. The little maze of plywood walls that visitors needed to navigate before seeing the

photograph was, like the cheap but plentiful garbage bags, a compromise inspired by limited funds. Briefly there existed on paper a wonderful rotating door that the visitor would pass through before seeing the photograph (figure 4). When it became clear the money we had allocated to "Research Other Costs" would not pay for a revolving door, the door became a heavy black curtain drawn onto our plans as a squiggly line. When the imaginary curtain proved too expensive, the plywood walls became the only solution to engineer the possibility that a visitor would pause and consider their decision to see the photograph.

Our design of the installation was, in other words, directed by a desire to make this image potent and problematic and then to control its potency. As collective, we were, however, haunted by the anxiety, given form in the figure of the thoughtless visitor, that the experience of seeing the big photograph of skulls could, if unregulated, become reduced to a mere spectacle and void of the possibility of ethical unsettlement.

The promiscuity of images

Maybe this anxiety had something to do with the medium. The making and printing the skull cabinet panorama was a complex and costly undertaking. Nonetheless, this was and is a digital photograph and once printed, digital photographs could be taken of the panorama. The image we so carefully curated as "contentious heritage" could, therefore, become promiscuous, escaping the confines of the exhibition to reproduce, multiply and mutate.

Our concern with the potential proliferation and commodification of images of skulls in the age of mechanical, now digital, reproduction (Benjamin 1937; Davis 1995; Kearl 2015) was not so much a matter of maintaining the aura and authenticity of the photograph as a work of "art" (in conversation Tal was clear that the work was the whole of the exhibition and not only the photograph itself); it was, rather, a matter of taking care in our handling of material that we deemed potentially hazardous.

This was an ethical hazard. At the very centre of our work was an understanding that for some, in particular indigenous peoples who had seen the remains of their ancestors looted and exiled to faraway European cities, the keeping and exhibition of skulls had the potential to be profoundly troubling and hurtful (Riding In 1992; Turnbull 2007). This understanding translated into an ethical obligation that we take care when exhibiting this photograph so as to ensure it was not encountered haphazardly but with due notice and in a spirit of quiet and critical reflection. This care, as discussed above, was materialised in the very design of the exhibition, but it was also expressed in our concern with controlling the potential promiscuity of the digital image and the printed photograph (Harries et al. 2018).

For example, in drawing-up a contract with Eastern Digital Exhibition and Display for the printing of the photograph (figure 4), Tal placed a series of restrictions on the production of the image including that they would "not allow anyone … to photograph the prints or parts of them", "treat these images of the dead with the respect accorded to the ancestors" and "immediately destroy and discard any prints, test prints or parts of them."

The exception to this last demand was, of course, the 32 printed sections that were assembled as a panoramic photograph of the skull cabinet. But when the time came and the exhibition was closed, these also needed to be destroyed. Tal gave Callum guidance concerning the proper destruction and disposal of the photograph, suggesting that it be cut into

> small enough pieces that it will not be possible to salvage them from the bin and 'keep a souvenir.' So this means there shouldn't be an image of a whole skull. I guess the pieces have to be around 10-15 cm or less in height, and around 20-30 cm or less in length.

Joan, Linda and I then hit upon the idea of burning the photograph. Linda already had a working relationship with Dr. Rory Hadden and his colleagues at the BRE Centre for Fire

Safety Engineering and they very kindly agreed to burn the remains of the big photograph under controlled conditions.

So it was that on August 28th Callum and I ripped the photograph free of the MDF wall so it could to be stored in a cupboard where it would await final transport to the Fire Lab at King's Buildings, the science campus of the University of Edinburgh. All this motivated by a desire to safely dispose of hazardous waste, created by the disassembling of an exhibition, so as to prevent the image becoming promiscuous. This is why it seemed so perverse and darkly humorous that the very thing purchased to manage the photograph as waste, some cheap bin bags, tore away in our hands, exposing the image to any who would pass by (figure 5).

Toxic remains

The bags filled with the mangled remains of the photograph remained in the cupboard in the Chrystal MacMillan Building until Monday the 8th of October. Then Linda and I shifted the bags into a black cab and transported them to the entrance of the John Muir Building. Joan arrived by bicycle and then Rory found us and helped us carry the bags to the Fire Lab on the first floor.

We were directed to put on goggles and given masks to cover our mouth and nose. The bags were pulled to shreds and then some, perhaps a third, of the remains of the photograph were piled onto a grill supported by bricks, below which was a metal pan filled with diesel oil. The oil was set alight and the photograph began to burn. Grey-black smoked billowed up and was gathered by a ventilation hood. The flames were orange and yellow and sometimes purple as they took on the colours of the ink. The torn and folded lumps of the photograph blackened and then turned to grey ash (figure 6).

The air became sour and strange. We pulled the masks over our faces and became mindful of our breathing. Rightly so. Vinyl, or PVC, burns poisonously giving off carbon monoxide, hydrogen chloride and dioxins (Huggett & Levin 1987; Buekens & Cen 2011: 193-195). The notion that the print of the photograph was hazardous waste was, then, not simply figurative, a way of describing the ethical anxieties that surrounded the disassembling of an exhibit concerning the contentious heritage of human remains held in public institutions in Europe. This stuff was literally, physically, toxic.

I had a class to teach and so left early. I was light-headed, feeling a bit dizzy and sickly. In my absence, they built a bigger fire, bigger is better Rory said, consuming the remainder of the ruined photograph. According to Joan and Linda the fire burned a long time.

We asked if we could retain some of whatever was left of the photograph after the fire. On the Friday I collected seven plastic jars of grey-black ash and a plastic box holding blackened lumps of stuff that was once the photograph. Looking closely and fancifully at these lumps one could imagine them as the surface of some dead faraway planet, or an asteroid, dry, ashen, pitted with little holes. One could also, still and in spite of all our efforts, see the melted, twisted image of a skull held within the folds of this black and ruined alien landscape.

I kept this material in my office for a few hours but I came to feel it was poisoning me, this toxic residue of a toxic legacy. I opened the window. Then I phoned Linda. She came by and we carried the remains to a lab in archaeology. There, at the time of writing, it sits in a lab under a fume-hood.

We are unsure what to do with this ash and blackened lumps of poisonous matter.

More art perhaps.

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